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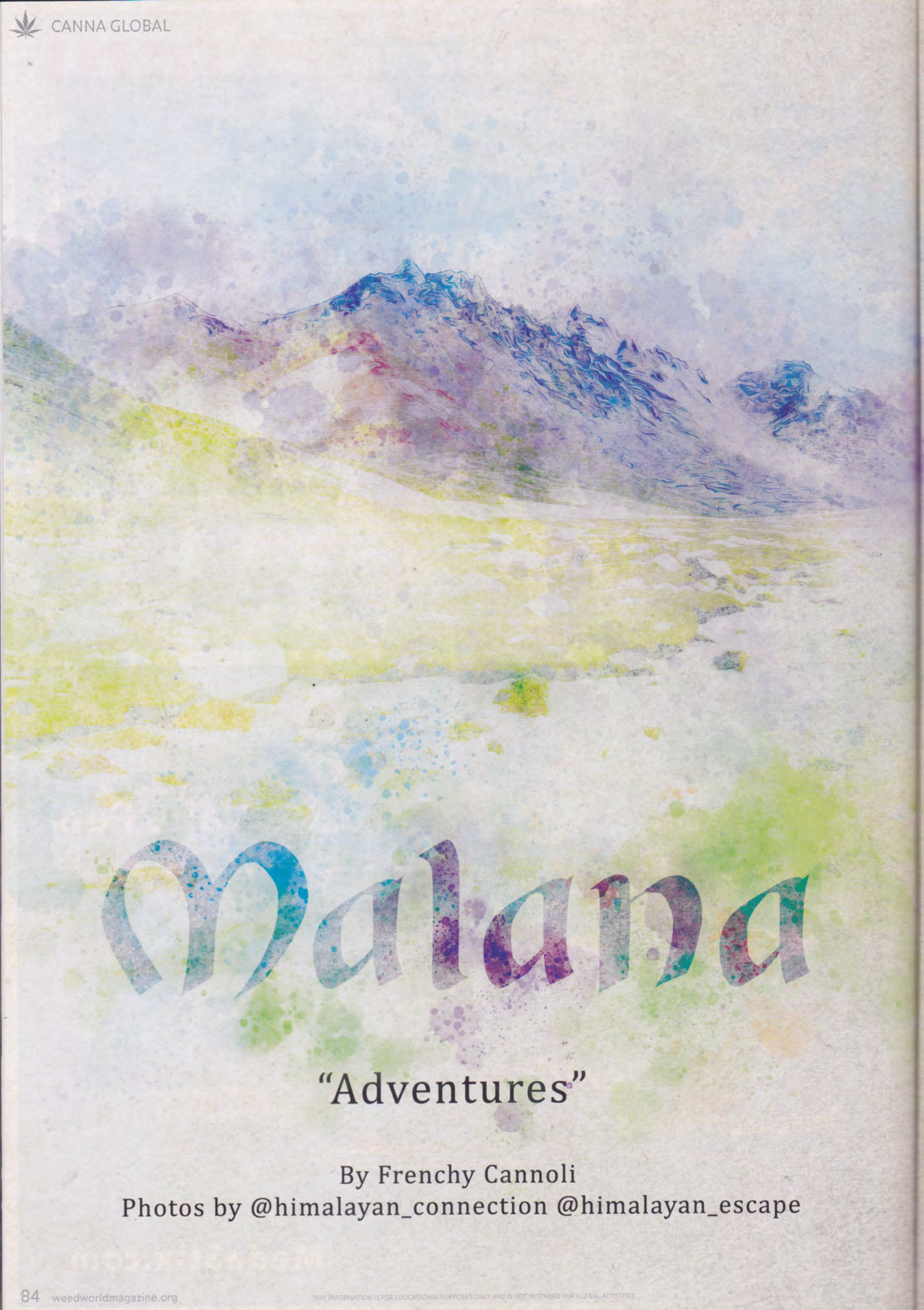
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Mallama

“Adventures”

By Frenchy Cannoli
Photos by @himalayan_connection @himalayan_escape

The countries I have visited along with the cultures, religions and adventures I have experienced have shaped the person I am today; however, few have had as profound an impact on me as the months spent collecting live resin on my hands in Waichin, the last summer pasture of the Malana Valley.

I was deeply in love, there was no place in the whole wide world I would have rather been from September to early December than in this tiny valley in the vastness of the Himalayan mountains making charas.

As you will see, this love affair was as rewarding as it was demanding, both physically and mentally; nothing of real value comes cheaply in life.

The seasons are a little mixed up in my memory, however what differentiates each year clearly is the walk back to civilization though a 12,000-foot pass after the first snow. I had been lucky in my first season: avoiding the first snow was not an experience I would be able to enjoy again.

The reason behind this was simple, there is only one road to come down from the Parvati Valley and it was always policed, especially at the onset of winter, starting in Manikaran, then Kasol and most heavily at the entrance of the Kullu Valley in Bhuntar. The only safe passage available when making charas at the end of the Parvati Valley was to come down from Tosh and Nakthan at night, full moon when possible but going through Manikaran well before daybreak was the key to avoiding any confrontations. From Manikaran you had to parallel the road

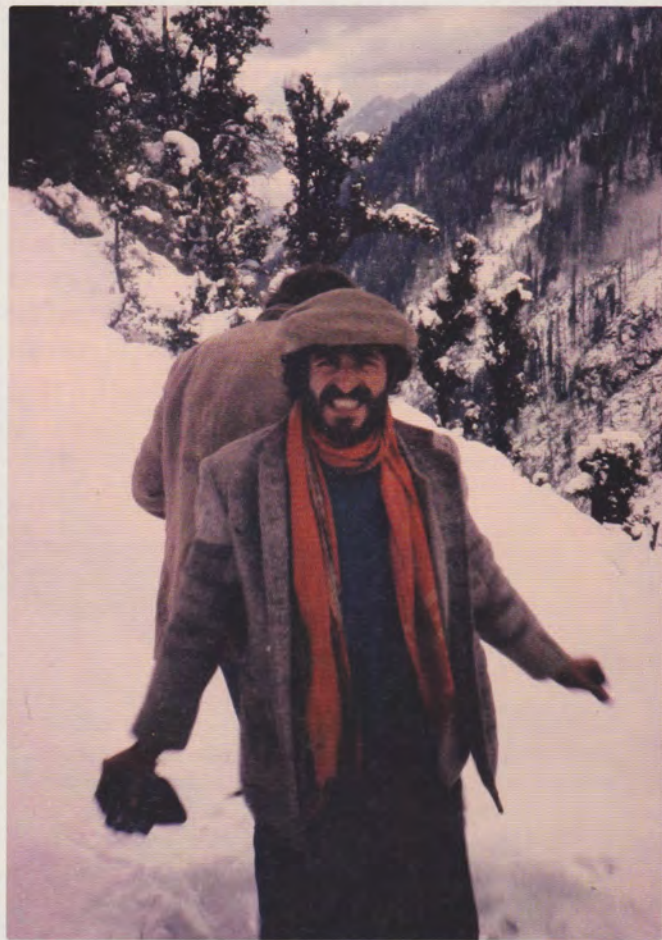
until you passed Kasol and followed a riverbed to finally face a final and brutal Himalayan mountain stairway for three hours to the village of Malana, perched at close to 9,000 feet. It was then another day's walk through the Chanderkhani pass to reach safely the more touristic and populated Kullu Valley. The only safe way out was through that pass.

My third season started pretty much like the previous year; three weeks by myself in Tosh and Nakthan before heading to Waichin for the rest of the season. I was super excited to see the fields that had been allowed to revert to their wild state. I was confident on the results but, to hedge our bets, Toumi rented some of the neighboring cultivated fields, which we needed to do anyway because we had guests for the season, a French couple and my best friend Bruno who was back in the mountains and came with two donkeys heavily loaded with everything from the basic necessities to the most luxurious delicacies. In terms of food this season, it was going to be "Versailles" as we say in French.

The plants gone wild had been transformed. They were a lot smaller and much more diverse in appearance, but the gardens were not as densely populated as I had hoped for, the natural selection of the first winter had taken its toll.

Life was simple in Waichin, wake up with the first light, bring the fire back to life, smoke a few chillums with a few cups of tea while a very substantial meal is prepared. Eat like it will be the only meal of the day, smoke more chillums, clean-up the camp and get ready for a long hot day with very sticky hands. There is little that can be done while you are making charas, even a chillum is a challenge to prepare with resin covered hands, so you'd better pre-roll seriously for the day if you were planning to have a smoke.





The days in the fields were a surreal and intense experience; the heat, the altitude, the overpowering smells of the plants, the resin slowly layering on your hands and the solitude was like a Hashishin's dream of paradise, an El Dorado of cannabis resin. We would even make charas at night during the full moon too. We would collect the plants with the last rays of the sun and after our meal we would spread the plants around the camp fire to warm them to regain the resin's stickiness and make a few precious hands of charas under the moon.

Timing is everything in late autumn in the Himalayas. There is a fine line between making the most of the season and protracting it into winter. We stayed a little too long that year, a huge snowstorm too long to be exact.

It was impossible to judge the odds we were to face to get to the Kullu Valley. We had no choice in any case but to move before the next snow created worse conditions. Three Italians coming from the Parvati valley joined our little group in the morning for a climb of 3,000 feet which was pretty much straight up. We had little snow until getting close to the actual pass. The Chanderkhani Pass from Malana is a tough walk especially with inappropriate overloaded bags and old broken local tennis shoes with plastic bags as a waterproof lining; the local wool jacket, vest and pants were the only decent mountain gear we had.

Under normal conditions, getting to the pass was the hard part of the trek. Once on the Kullu side of the Chanderkhani you only had to follow the ridge of the mountain for an easy 40-minute walk or so before going through the forest, all downhill, with a good trail, all the way to Naggar.

This trip was different. We had no idea what we were getting

into until the moment we stepped through the actual pass. On the Malana side there were only patches of snow towards the top, on the Kullu side it was pure white and over three feet deep. The 40-minute walk on the ridge became an eight-hour nightmare with no option but to move forward or freeze. Breaking the snow on the trail was impossible to sustain for long, so we took turns as the lead, the Italians were a godsend for this. Finally, after the most punishing hours any of us had ever experienced we made it to the forest line by nightfall dead on our feet, wet and shivering from cold.

As much as stopping on the ridge wasn't a viable option, we could have made camp at that point in the forest but we were getting close and none of us wanted to spend a night out in the elements. Instead, we trekked down through the dense forest, so dark that we lost the trail, and started to shortcut toward the general direction of Naggar. We were going down fast, stepping and jumping in thick layers of autumn leaves, enjoying the momentum towards our final destination until at a final slope on a small opening in the forest (less than an hour's walk from our destination) one of the Italians fell hard on his back and slid for a distance on the steep slope with his backpack open, leaving a long trail of charas in the thick layer of autumn leaves. We planted some markers, made a large fire at the foot of the slope and waited for daylight which wasn't too far away. At that point we had only one major problem - we had run out of cigarettes to make chillums, however, I had dried some flowers that year, Thai Stick style, as an experiment which saved the night. I never tried to dry flowers from this region again, and the chillums were so loaded with charas on that night that I did not really have a chance to taste the flavor of the flowers. I am still wondering how they would compare on the flower market today.



the spot where my big deep cooking pots ended up like flat pancakes underneath two of the roof beams. I understood at that second how very little difference there is between a miracle and a catastrophe.

We were in trouble. The sky had fallen on our heads. Staying in Waichin was not an option without a refuge. We had to pack fast and get back to Malana, which is usually a mere two-hour walk, but with two feet of snow and no recognizable landmarks in a pristine winter landscape it became a treacherous and exhausting walk that lasted most of the day with little appreciation for the breathtaking beauty of the winter in the Himalayas.

We stayed at Centuram Place, the home of a lower caste Hindu family living in Malana, which was the only house any foreigners or lower caste Hindu could enter in the village. We thought the snow was just an early messenger of winter to come because the following morning was warm and sunny, the snow was melting fast enough that we went back after a day to have a look at our field in the hopes of seeing some surviving plants, and to check the quality of resin they would produce. Most of the plants had survived the snow, which was an amazing show of genetic strength and adaptation. They were burnt out and mostly dry from the cold but still standing. The resin was super sticky and hard to clean on our hands because of the dryness of the flowers. This "snow charas" was really potent and quite different from anything I had ever smoked. We stayed the few days necessary to collect this exceptional winter bounty, but it turns out that gambling with Himalayan weather at the beginning of winter is not a good idea. It started snowing lightly late in the afternoon and part of the night preceding our departure from Malana. We were nonetheless confident because two Malanese had come through the Chanderkhani on that day using a winter shortcut from Naggar, the track they had left in the snow would be easy to follow, or so we thought.



We were pretty much dead on our feet in the morning, but cheerful to be almost home. We hunted for the fingers of Charas in the piles of leaves as soon as we had enough light. It was not as impossible a task as we initially imagined, and were mostly successful in finding everything the Italian had lost in his fall, a nice ending to one of the most epic journeys of my life.

On that morning, I swore solemnly to never do such a crazy move ever again, but I did...the very next season...and it was worse, much worse.

The following year we were still in Waichin finishing the last field when we woke up to a world gone white, grey and cold. That year we had been gifted the right to use quarry stones and wood beams from an old summer pasture structure to make our campsite. We had made a wide and deep stone fireplace the length of the shelter with solid stone pillars on each side to support the heavy beams of the rooftop frame. The back wall was a depression in the hill easy to adapt as a support for the heavy wood beams of the roof and to make it waterproof. The side walls and the door of our abode were made of thick layers of intertwined pines branches.

The wake-up call was brutal - the roof broke under the weight of the snow at first light. If I had not stayed a minute or two longer in bed tucked into a warm ball and gone to start the fire for the morning tea and food as usual, I would have been exactly at

It was not to be. Like the preceding season, the Malana side of the Chanderkhani had only a thin layer of snow but on the Kullu side the snow was deep and there were no tracks to follow. Since we had had such a painful experience following the mountain ridge the preceding year there was no way we were trying that again, and so we opted to just go straight down (which was in fact as debilitating as walking the ridge). The snow was dense and came up to our mid-thighs most of the time but we also often had snow to our chests too when stepping into unseen depressions and crossing small ravines. We were wet from head to toe, and beyond exhausted when we finally came to the snow line at dusk on a steep forested slope. We had been tracking the sound of water, planning to follow the river to the valley, when we came suddenly upon a cliff towering over a raging river. We had found the river but had no idea in the closing darkness how to get down to it, we had to settle down for the night and the slope was so steep that we had to tie ourselves to a tree for the night.

We moved on at first light contouring the cliff precariously for most of the morning before we could get down to the river without breaking our necks and follow it safely to civilization.

Writing these stories almost forty years later makes me wonder seriously about my young fearlessness, or was it cluelessness?

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